

A Dying Face Can't Lie

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REPLACE NOVEL 5 CHAPTER 1 - STOPPING ALONG THE WAY (featuring Nijimura and Himuro)

My editor changed the title to “A Scenic Route” because she thought it made more sense.

I’ll also be making use of the queue feature for the first time ever because this thing is so long lol. I’ll be setting it to every five hours or so. (So sorry to everyone on mobile.)

Everything that was originally in English is underlined.

Let me know if you have any questions!

| *Translated by me. Edited and proofread by the wonderful [Emma](#).*

Enjoy!

A Scenic Route

Part 1

There is a saying that goes something like: “meeting a Buddha in hell (meaning that you’ll often find help in unexpected places).” But I never expected a ‘Buddha’ to look so beautiful. In this foreign land of Los Angeles, the guy that saved me when I was in a pinch was astonishingly beautiful.

It wasn’t only me. The men around me, who had all been speaking rapid-fire English, had all fallen silent as he approached.

Glancing at his black hair, I guessed that he’s Asian, but his skin is unexpectedly pale. Although he also looks like he’s Japanese, he’s tall and lanky. I’m unusually tall, but he’s around the same height, roughly 180 cm.

Even though he was slender, he wasn’t fragile. His most impressive feature, however, was his face. It was outrageously beautiful.

It was small, with delicate features. The long fringe covering his left eye only further served to enhance the air of mystery surrounding him.

If a beauty like him smiled at you, I’m sure you’d find yourself speechless.

(“On the attractiveness scale, he might even be on par with Kise.”)

I couldn’t help but think, even though the immediate situation was far from good. This gorgeous guy in front of me seemed to notice my stare and turned around with a smile. Then, he walked to the men around me and started discussing something in English.

He spoke quickly, the words rapidly coming out. I was still very confused, but it made me relieved that there was now a third party involved.

I noticed the boy next to him.

“Ah...Mike?” I whispered.

He heard me, and although he still looked nervous, he nodded his head as if to tell me, “I’m fine, don’t worry about it.”

The fact that Mike was willing to stand next to him surely meant that this beauty was on my side.

Looking closely, I could see some other kids behind this beautiful guy and Mike. They all looked very anxious and their bodies were stiff. Hoping to ease their tension, I nodded toward them, as if to say, “It’s okay.”

Then, one of the men around me started to move. Suddenly, there was a loud sound.

“Eh?”

I reflexively looked over and could not believe my eyes.

You wouldn’t have believed it: Someone with a face that looks like he couldn’t even kill a bug had managed to punch a man almost 2 meters tall. Who would’ve thought?

Part 2

As if watching a movie, I saw the man fall backwards in slow motion.

He was unable to move, lying flat on his back on the basketball court. The impact of the blow seemed to have rendered him unconscious.

The rest of us felt as though we were in a similar state. I and the other men around me all stared in shock. The one who had done the deed was undoubtedly this beautiful guy, who could have passed for an action star. And yet, he was able to punch that big guy to the ground.

From the sound of the hit, you can tell that he wasn’t weak.

(What caused him to do this?)

I looked up stiffly at him. Upon meeting my glance, he quickly stepped over the unconscious body and grabbed my wrist.

“Run!” He said urgently in Japanese, pulling me along behind him. Mike and his friends were quick to follow.

We flew out of the basketball court and onto the streets, trying to run as far and as fast as possible. Even though we should have been able to hear those men yelling behind us, the sound had gotten lost in the crowd.

The hand that was grabbing my wrist slackened, so I had to follow closely in order not to get lost.

I cursed my bad luck. Ever since I had arrived in Los Angeles, it had been like a movie.

(In America, even trying to ensure your own safety is impossible...)

As I tried to regroup my energy, he turned around and seemed to say something to me. I couldn’t hear him, so I ran a little faster to catch up to him.

“What did you say?” I asked.

He looked a little surprised, but smiled. “I just said that you’re very fast. You’re matching my speed without any difficulty.”

“That’s probably a result of playing basketball.”

“Oh, no wonder you and Mike were together,” he said, a look of realization dawning on his face.

“Speaking of Mike,” I wondered. “Can Mike keep up with this pace? I turned around, but I didn’t see Mike anywhere.

“Huh? Where did Mike go?”

“I told him beforehand to run in the other direction. It’s easier to catch up to a larger group of people.”

He slowed his running speed and I passed him, which allowed me to get a closer look at his expression. His face was full of regret as he said, “It’s because Mike invited you that you got into all of this. I’m sorry.”

“No, it was my own fault. Thank you for saving me.”

I had wanted to resolve the situation peacefully, but looking back on it, I realize that it would have been impossible.

“Where are we going now?” Even though I had decided to follow him, I still had to ask. To be honest, I didn’t know what to do next. I didn’t know where to go. This guy, who could speak Japanese, was my lifesaver. I worried that he would turn around and ask, “Where are you planning to follow me to?” That would not be good.

I waited anxiously for his answer.

“We’re going to visit my teacher. Don’t worry. She’s a very reliable person. I heard a little bit from Mike. It sounds like you’re in a bit of trouble now.”

“Ah...yeah. It’s a little embarrassing.” I smiled sourly.

As if trying to cheer me up, he smiled warmly and said, “I can listen if you want to complain.”

“That reminds me. I haven’t asked for your name yet.”

He told me his name—Himuro Tatsuya.

What was even more surprising, however, was that like me, he was 15 years old.

“Whoa. You’re very mature for a 15 year old. Are you sure you’re not lying about your age?”

“The same goes for you, Nijimura-san.”

I don’t know why, but I blushed slightly at the ‘san’. It seemed like he hoped to become closer to me in the future.

I wouldn’t have cared so much in Japan, but it seemed rather inconsistent with the atmosphere here, so I said, “You can just call me by my first name. Can I call you Tatsuya?”

“Sure. Then I’ll call you Shuu.”

And so I, Nijimura Shuuzou, and Himuro Tatsuya, now finally on equal footing, smiled at each other.

Part 3

Himuro brought me to what seemed like a public basketball court. When we entered, I could hear the friction of the shoes on the floor, the bouncing of the ball and the voices of players.

“My teacher is the coach of this ball club. They’re having practice right now, so we’ll have to wait for a bit.”

Himuro went up the stairs and I followed him, looking around at everything.

When we got to the second floor, I gasped, “Whoa, amazing. It’s so big.”

I had already guessed that it was big from the outside of the building, but it was even vaster than I expected on the inside. The ceilings were much higher than normal.

There were three basketball courts, side by side, with 3 groups of teenagers playing. Even though my basketball team had had more members, this was the native land of basketball.

“The person standing in the middle is my teacher.” Himuro gestured at the court, while looking for a seat. I glanced in the direction he was pointing. There was a tall blond woman, teaching the kids how to shoot.

“Your coach is a woman?!”

“Ah, yea. Alex used to be a professional player. She’s very good. If you underestimate her because she’s a woman, you’ll regret it.”

“Huh...”

We found seats and sat side by side.

“Whew...” I couldn’t help but let out a sigh of relief, grateful that I finally got a place to sit and settle down. Suddenly, a wave of fatigue hit me and my legs felt heavy. Well, it can’t be helped; just a day ago, I was still sitting on an airplane.

I took a deep breath. Breathing is very important for relaxation.

Seeing me in this state, Himuro smiled, looking a bit pained.

“That looks tough,” he said.

“I can’t deny it. I still feel a little dizzy.” I shrugged helplessly, leaning against the back of my chair. Himuro kept quiet, as if waiting for me to say something first.

Where should I start? As I thought it over, I pursed my mouth slightly—an old habit.

It’d probably be best to start with my arrival in America.

Part 4

I had arrived in America just this morning. I didn’t come here for sightseeing or because a family member got relocated, but because of my father’s medical treatment.

My father was admitted to the hospital 2 years ago, and at first seemed to be recovering well. However, he later acquired other diseases as well. The doctors even told me that they weren’t sure if my father would live past the summer.

My family and I have already prepared for the worst. We nervously check our phones every day for any calls from the hospital notifications.

My father miraculously survived those next 2 summers, but it didn’t mean that his condition had improved, or that the situation could be taken lightly.

We learned of a doctor who specialized in my father’s illness, so we came here.

My father, younger brother and younger sister came over last December. It was necessary that I graduate first before I rushing over. My father, lying on the bed, had said, “You have to graduate before you’re allowed to come

over here.” I had to abide by his request.

I graduated from my Japanese school. The graduation was yesterday. In fact, if you count the time difference, it’s still today. However, after rolling up my diploma into its traditional cylindrical shape, saying my goodbyes and coming here...perhaps because I’ve travelled so far, that those things seem like they happened so long ago.

After the graduation ceremony, I rushed home, and then immediately to the airport. I had already sent my luggage ahead by express mail, so all I had with me was a small backpack. This made the airport checks go faster.

I was on the plane for about 10 hours. I napped from time to time, and before I started to get too impatient, the plane had finally landed in the Los Angeles International airport.

After going through the immigration formalities, I was officially in the United States. By now, almost everyone was speaking English. Although I heard other immigrants speaking different languages.

(I can do it!)

There I was; a man who had come to America despite his fear of airplanes. It’s not that I’m afraid of heights, as much as that feeling when your feet don’t touch the earth as you step down.

Once, when we were riding a plane to a game, Kise had said “Captain, relax a little, alright? You look 3 times scarier than normal!” Compared to then, this trip was much more relaxing. I did punish Kise after that trip, though.

My family had agreed that I would go directly to the hospital. I sent a quick “I’ve arrived safely” message to my father before walking out of the airport. In order to get to the hospital, I would have to change buses. Even though a cab would’ve gone straight to the hospital, it wouldn’t have been safe for a student to travel by himself in a taxi.

My father had insisted on picking me up, but I had refused, telling him that “It’s fun to navigate foreign streets, so don’t come to pick me up.” To be honest, the real reason I refused him was that I was here because of him. I couldn’t make him worry about me.

I stretched a bit to ease the travel kinks out of my body, and then checked my phone to make sure I knew which bus I was supposed to get on. Then, I began to look around for the station. It was hard, but I had high expectations for myself. After all, I had managed to come to America by myself, which had greatly boosted my confidence. In addition, even if I can’t go there directly, taking “the scenic route” is my specialty. Most importantly, I have an appointment with my father that I have to keep. Gazing out the window of the airport, I saw the sun shining in, dazzling. It seemed like a good sign.

However, reality is often the opposite of what it seems.

Part 5

From the very beginning, it was a disaster.

“Ah...what next?”

I got off the bus and took out my phone to check my location. I looked around at the street signs, but they didn’t seem right.

It was obvious to everyone that I was a tourist who knew nothing about the local geography.

“Here...right?”

Just as I confirmed the direction on my phone and began to move, someone bumped into me from behind.

“Whoa!” Surprised, I accidentally dropped my phone.

“Oops.” I quickly bent down to retrieve it, but was pushed again from behind.

Surprised, I took two or three steps forward to regain my balance. Before I could turn around, someone had grabbed my left shoulder.

“What are you doing?!” I yelled unconsciously, forgetting the language barrier. Now was not the time to yell.

My eyes landed on a man who quickly walked past me. In his hand was...

“My backpack!”

I quickly grabbed my phone and sprinted after the thief, but everything was working against me. The streets were foreign, and rows and rows of buildings surrounded me. I didn’t know the area, so I couldn’t run after him at full speed.

After a few minutes, I lost him. He probably had an accomplice waiting for him.

I had lost my wallet and my passport.

(Damn it.)

The only thing I had left was my phone. I looked down at it, stunned. The screen was completely blank. I hurriedly pressed all the buttons, but there was no response.

It was broken.

“What do I do now...?!”

I had thought that the map on my phone would always be available, so I hadn’t bothered to memorize the route to the hospital.

But, hold on a moment. Before I think about the hospital’s address...

“Where am I now?”

I was in a quiet residential street. This was definitely America, where everyone had such nice lawns.

Wait, now’s not the time to think such pointless thoughts. The biggest problem is that the neighborhood I’m in now and the neighborhood where I got off the bus are completely different.

I just stood there, staring dumbly.

Part 6

I should go to the police? But where is the police station?

There was no other way. I went up to a nearby house and gave the woman the hospital’s name. My broken English confused her, but she finally understood and gave me directions.

Even though it was very detailed, it was too long and hard to remember.

“Eh, ah, go, straight? End, turn left?”

“No, turn right at the corner.”

The woman calmly responded to my barrage of questions. Americans are such compassionate people...

Once I was able to barely remember the directions, I thanked the woman. Putting my broken phone in my jeans pocket, I set out. Even though I was still concerned about my stolen passport, now was not the time to be thinking about it. I'll worry about it when I get to the hospital.

Part 7

"This is so hard..." I muttered to myself, standing at an intersection. I had been walking for 30 minutes already. Why didn't I see anything resembling a hospital yet? It's supposed to be a very big hospital, so it should be hard to miss.

According to the woman's directions, all that was left was to continue walking straight. But I've already been walking straight for 20 minutes now. Is it not here yet? Or was there some flaw in her directions? Or maybe I just didn't understand her directions.

(Let's ask another person.)

The neighborhood had changed from a residential area to a shopping district. There were some little shops, such as an ice cream shop, but they were closed. Other than that, it was just green grass. Every new neighborhood made me uneasy. The cars kept passing by on the road. There were no pedestrians for me to ask.

Just when I thought that...

"Hai! Sammurai!"

"...who?" I turned in surprise towards the voice. On the side of the street that I had just come from, there was a fence surrounding a basketball court. Several kids were there, one of whom was waving at me. His orange hair was very prominent. Who was he?

"Sammura—i!"

The kid waved enthusiastically at me. I unconsciously waved back, and his face lit up, waving even more forcibly.

"Sakura! Saku! Ninja! Muteki!" The boy continued to shout. It seemed that he was so excited to meet a real Japanese person that he intended to show off his entire Japanese vocabulary.

(Let's just ask that kid.)

I quickly ran over to the court. The other teenagers looked surprised, but that kid just came over to greet me, holding a basketball.

"Basuke suki?" (Do you like basketball?)

"What?"

The boy looked at me eagerly, waiting for my answer.

The question overwhelmed me. While before, he was just randomly shouting words; he had somehow managed to connect them into a sentence.

"Basuke suki?" The boy asked again.

"Yes." I mentally scolded myself after I responded. The boy had asked in Japanese, so why did you respond in English? I couldn't take my words back.

However, the boy only seemed to care about my answer and smiled, passing the ball to me. It was a very good

pass.

Part 8

I reflexively caught it. The surface of the ball was all worn out, probably because they were playing in an outdoor court.

“Hey!” The kid greeted me. He nudged his head at the basketball hoop. He wanted me to play with him.

Unconsciously, I grinned, and started dribbling. The bounce was terrible. It must not have been inflated in a long time. I remembered the basketballs at my school were always in perfect condition because of our manager.

But for now, this would do.

I lowered my waist and began to dribble, passing by one of the kids. One of them whistled in admiration at my speed, others gasped in surprise. This kind of reaction struck me as refreshing. Kids in the United States are so expressive.

I smiled, and jumped towards the basket. Even though layups are very simple, they all watched me, stunned. Everyone was staring at me.

(Might as well show them a trick.)

I suddenly lowered the arm I had stretched out towards the hoop. I could hear the “Huh?”s of the kids. I couldn’t help but smile as, I gracefully shot a layup from the other side of the basket. The ball gently rolled into the hoop.

“Oh, it went in.”

When my feet touched the ground again, I wasn’t focusing on my balance, so I had to throw my hands out to keep me from falling over. I hadn’t played basketball in awhile, so it’s good that I’d made the shot, or else it would have been humiliating.

Once I had picked up the ball and turned around, the kids charged at me excitedly, so I still ended up with my butt on the ground.

“Ouch.” I landed on my tailbone, but the kids didn’t seem to care.

“Let’s play together!”

“Eh? ...what?!”

Still slightly groggy, I was hauled up by 3 of them and pushed over to the three point line, where they basically forced me to play with them.

(But now isn’t the time for me to be playing basketball...)

I was about to say it, when the orange haired boy passed me the ball. As if on autopilot, I caught it and reflexively passed it. I could feel myself slowly regained my playing style. Soon, I had forgotten about the time now that the basketball was in my hands.

Part 9

The orange haired kid’s name is Mike. He did tell me his last name, but it was far too difficult for me to pronounce, so he had said, “Just call me Mike!” The least I can do is remember that pronunciation.

Incidentally, we had exchanged names after we played a match and the kids calmed down a bit. At that time, I

explained my current situation to them: how my things were stolen, and how I couldn't find the hospital. However, I could tell that they didn't really understand, since Mike and his friends looked confused, but at least they knew that there were things troubling me now.

Mike nodded, finally with an expression of comprehension on his face. Then he said, "I have a friend who is Japanese. He'll be getting out of school later, and I think that he can help you."

The current situation couldn't be solved my level of English anymore.

"Are you OK?"

"Yes, thank you."

"You're welcome."

I don't know why I answered in English, when Mike asked in Japanese, but we smiled at each other all the same.

Coming to this decision, there seemed to be no further problems. Mike picked up the basketball and invited me to play again while his friends cheered in the background. It seemed like Mike's friend wouldn't get out of school for awhile, and since my hands were itching to touch a basketball after so long, I couldn't help but agree. The kids took turns going one-on-one with me, and I showed them the layup again. Soon, the kids asked for "one more," so I showed them a dunk, which had them dancing around and clapping.

Seeing them so happy made me smile. "Imagine if they saw Aomine play," I thought to myself. "That guy's superplay would make them go nuts."

(...that guy...he's okay, right?)

I couldn't remember the last time I saw Aomine, but I do recall that he was down and glum. After last summer, I tried to distance myself from those guys, but I did hear some rumors about how he went from "amazing" to "out of this world."

Just as I was thinking about this, a group of players came over.

"Hey! You're a good player!"

Three older guys had come strutting onto our court. One of them was a lot bigger than me, probably 2 meters tall with a very muscular build. He wore a T-shirt with a jacket on the outside, and his shoulder muscles were quite unusual. The other guy was about my height. He was wearing a backwards hat with a pair of big sunglasses. The last guy was shorter than me, but stocky with mohawk. They all looked older than me.

The three of them smiled wickedly, surrounding Mike and I. Their intentions were obvious. They were talking as they closed in on us. And although they were speaking way too fast for me to understand, judging by the look of fear on Mike's face as he shrank closer to me, I could guess that this was not good situation for us.

Part 10

First things first, I needed to find a way to ask them to leave. As I tried to think of what to say, my eyes were inadvertently drawn to something.

(Chest hair!!)

My eyes fell on the man's chest, where his chest hair was poking out from under his T-shirt. I didn't think that in such an emergency situation, I'd be paying attention to chest hair. I couldn't help but laugh at myself.

I didn't think I'd turn into such a leech.

"So, it's a deal!"

"Eh? What?"

The man smiled, a look of satisfaction on his face as he slapped me on the back. It stung, and I glared at the man. However, he simply continued smiling as the other two left the court.

(What? They just came here to talk to me?)

I felt relieved. Mike shook his head.

"It's alright, Mike."

"Shuu, it's very dangerous."

"What's dangerous?"

"You shouldn't make a bet on a basketball game with these kinds of guys. It's so dangerous!"

'Make a bet'—these words took some time for me to process. When I finally figured it out, I glanced over at the man, who was standing at the three point line. His two buddies were standing on the sidelines, grinning.

It seems like I've become involved in a bet.

(Why me?!)

Are you kidding? I don't have a single cent on me right now. I don't want to get involved in this. Did they think that just because I stood there and smiled, that I meant to say "OK"? I was just laughing at your chest hair. How do I clear up this misunderstanding? How do I even say 'chest hair' in English? ...'bust hair'? No, that's not it!

"Let's get started!" The man roared. Mike and the other kids stood at a distance, scared. It seemed as though everything was going according to the man's calculations.

It's so low to force a foreigner who doesn't understand English well into gambling. You're just after my money. Since it's like this, then I suppose I'll fight with all my strength.

(I never thought that it would turn out like this.)

I sighed and walked over to the three point line.

Part 11

"So, you won?" Himuro narrowed his eyes.

"Yeah, but there was no other way," I answered him, leaning lazily against the chair.

He smiled and nodded. "Yeah, that's the only way if you don't have any money. But it's hard to win against someone like that."

Yeah. I was naïve to think that one win would be enough.

After the first win, he smirked as if he thought it was a fluke said, "One more!" After the second win, he stared at me and growled, "One more!" After the third win, he said a bunch of words that I couldn't understand and hauled me up by my collar.

Just as it seemed like I was in for a world of trouble, Himuro had arrived.

“When you came, I thought that you would solve the problem peacefully. I didn’t think that you’d resort to violence...”

I turned to look at him. He had propped his head up on his elbow, and was wearing a Cheshire cat smile.

“I used to think that too, but then I realized that some people don’t listen unless you fight them.”

“Unless you fight them? Oh, you’re used to fighting.”

“Really? I don’t feel that way,” Himuro responded calmly. That was obviously a lie, or else he would never have punched such a big man.

Himuro seemed to notice my suspicion, since he smiled and changed the topic. “Speaking of the hospital, I know where it is.”

“Really?!” I immediately straightened up. Himuro nodded.

“I’ve never been there before, but I know a bit about it. It’s a little far, so I’ll find you a ride.”

“Really? You’re a lifesaver.”

That took care of the hospital problem. I could finally see a ray of hope.

Himuro’s coach has a car, so we planned to ask her when she was done teaching.

“Should you contact your parents first? They must be worried about you.” Himuro gave me his phone.

“Thanks.” I took the phone, only to realize that I didn’t know my parents’ phone numbers.

“Shuu, you sure have a lot of guts to walk around like that.”

“That might be true, but my family has always been tolerant of my taking ‘the scenic route.’” I laughed.

Himuro was confused. “What does that mean?”

“Ever since I was little, I would often get lost. That’s why, one day, someone told me,” I made a circle with my hands, my four fingers touching my thumb, looking down onto the court as if through a viewfinder. “If you’re going to take detours, you might as well take a look at the scenery.”

I looked down the ‘viewfinder’ at Himuro, who smiled.

“Who told you that?”

“My father.”

“You seem to have an interesting father.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t expect my little detour to involve getting lost and getting robbed.”

“You also gambled money. Some parents would faint after hearing that.”

“Yeah, that too.”

There was no helping it. If anyone asked, I’d just say that I got lost.

At this time, the whistle sounded, signaling the start of another match. Watching all these kids in high spirits, I suddenly remembered.

“Isn’t Mike also a student here?”

“He comes in on different days.”

According to Himuro, classes were held in three time slots: Monday and Thursday, Tuesday and Friday, or Wednesday and Saturday. There was actually double the number of students than were here right now. Once again, American basketball never ceases to amaze me.

“Did you also learn to play from here?”

“No. I come to help from time to time, but I taught myself basketball. Then, Alex coached me, and then I continued on with street basketball.”

“Ah, is that so?” I couldn’t help but narrow my eyes. It’s pretty interesting when a former professional player teaches anyone. “Hey, do you want to play sometimes? I still have some confidence when it comes to playing basketball.”

Himuro did not hesitate to accept my invitation.

Part 13

Luckily, there was an outdoor court here, too. Himuro and I started to head out of the building.

But before we could reach the back door, we heard the sound of panicked footsteps behind us. I unwittingly turned around. It was the kids who I had just been playing with. They pushed open the door and ran inside.

“I even told them to run in the other direction...” Himuro said incredulously, before waving at them and yelling, “Hey!”

The kids stopped. Upon seeing Himuro, an expression of relief mixed with anxiousness filled their faces as they rushed over. They surrounded Himuro and began talking rapidly. Even though I couldn’t understand anything they were saying, just from seeing their faces and noticing how Himuro’s expression changed, I could tell that something major had happened.

(What’s going on?)

I could only stare at them, when I suddenly realized something.

Mike was not there.

(Impossible...)

I pushed away this thought. Himuro, who had been listening to the kids’ reports, finally spoke up. His voice seemed to have a calming effect on the kids.

“Understand?”

Finally, there was a word that I understood. Unfortunately, it was also the last word in Himuro’s sentence. The kids nodded, and while they didn’t look very reassured, continuing to glance back at Himuro multiple times, they finally left.

After a moment, Himuro turned back to face me. Seeing his expression, I inhaled sharply. It seems that Himuro had been restraining himself in front of the kids, but facing me now, his face had lost all its color and his eyes were filled with cold fury. Still, with a pretty guy like him, his glare did not seem to have much bite.

"What happened?" I asked, unable to keep the worried tone out of my voice.

"Mike was kidnapped," Himuro answered coldly. His statement made me swallow nervously.

Part 14

"Mike was kidnapped by the guys from before."

"What?!"

In my mind's eye appeared the chest hair guy, the backwards hat guy and the guy with the mohawk. Did those guys actually manage to catch Mike?

"Those guys took Mike because you hit one of them? Those assholes...argh...enough is enough, already!"

"That's the kind of guys they are," Himuro said. "They said that they'd release Mike if we went and apologized."

So that was the reason those kids came by before.

"Things won't be that simple."

"Yeah, if we go, there's no guarantee that we'll make it out of there."

What was even scarier was that aside from anger, Himuro's voice had a hint of calmness. Well, it was the same for me.

"What should we do?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

Himuro turned to look at me, his eyes still cold. One corner of his mouth rose in smirk, and then he said slowly, "Of course, we'll go in and get Mike out unharmed. And then we'll make those guys realize just how stupid they are."

Ah, we really do think alike.

The corners of my lips also curled up.

Part 15

We went to the destination. Of course, there's no guarantee that Mike would be in there. There are a lot of cases where a hostage is kept elsewhere. However, since there's a time limit, we had no other choice. Himuro suggested that we might as well go to the designated location and take a look.

The time limit was 1 hour.

1 hour was also the time limit that Himuro set for himself. Apparently club training was to end in an hour. As a precaution, Himuro had left a note for his teacher, so that if we hadn't returned after 1 hour, his coach would come for us.

"If we can wrap this up in 1 hour, the worst that will happen is Alex will scold us. That's what I'm aiming for."

While Himuro might look like a child, when he decides to do things, he wants to finish them before there's any adult intervention.

"Do you have any idea where Mike is being held?"

"No."

“Seriously?!” I couldn’t help but exclaim upon hearing Himuro’s second response.

However, Himuro didn’t look anxious. “If you don’t have any clues, then attack from another angle.” After saying this, he picked up his phone and started dialing. The phone rang twice before the person on the other line picked up.

“Hi, it is Tatsuya. Is it John?”

Slowing down, Himuro started to talk to the person on the other end. He seemed to be explaining the situation. I guessed that person on the other line was listening, since Himuro was the only one talking.

After awhile, the person on the other end started to speak. What had happened? Was he angry?

Himuro hung up the phone and said, “Let’s go.” We started running again.

“Who was that on the phone?”

“Friends. We play street ball together.”

It turns out that the basketball court that Mike and I had been playing on was very important to Himuro. It’s the court that Himuro and his friends play on every week to determine a winner. It was very popular, so there was a rule that only kids could use the basketball court. Therefore, the appearance of 3 guys who extorted others, kidnapped Mike, and threatened Himuro was sure to anger his friends.

So, Himuro had asked them to find out what other locations the chest hair bastard frequented.

Part 16

“You can just find that out? Those guys are that predictable, are they?”

“People who gamble with basketball, are usually very confident in their skills, and would much rather prey on other basketball players rather than just anyone, so they can usually be found at particular locations,” Himuro explained.

I didn’t quite understand, so I asked Himuro to clarify.

“Gambling with money usually attracts a crowd. There will be a lot of commotion and disputes at these places, so finding these people should actually be quite easy.”

My mind went blank. So he actually had some underground connections?

“Tatsuya, are you really the same age as I am?”

“What good would lying about my age do?”

“No, but is this really a conversation two teenagers should be having? Anyways, do you also gamble?”

“No, not really. But, Alex, my coach, had a period of time when she was addicted to gambling, so I guess I got on good terms with some of those kinds of adults by following her around.

I was speechless, and suddenly struck with a sense of déjà vu.

(Right. It was when I was speaking with Akashi.)

That guy was only a year younger than me, but he has always managed to overshadow even adults. He’s surprised me multiple times. But even so, I couldn’t imagine Akashi getting involved in the underworld.

(Editor’s note: No, he’d probably just own all the cartels but not actually have anything to do with them)

(No, I'm too naïve. That guy is probably 'Akashi-sama' by now.)

The first time I learned that he was called 'Akashi-sama,' I was almost rolling on the floor with laughter. That guy had simply said calmly, "Oh," which had made it even more hilarious.

Although, I feel like we were all connected by basketball, everyone's personalities were very different.

"Shuu?"

"Yea?"

Immersed in memories, I quickly turned to face Himuro.

"You were smiling a little."

"Oh, sorry."

We're trying to save Mike right now. I need to focus and not think about the past.

Upon seeing my face, Himuro laughed. "It seems like remembered something funny. Your face gave it away."

"Hey! You...what did you say?!"

"This is the kind of conversation two teens should be having though, right?"

This guy sure is vindictive.

I was rendered speechless again, and Himuro takes the opportunity to pick up his ringing phone. In a second, his demeanor shifts into that of a different person. There really are all types of people in this world. I have once again experienced the profound meaning of the word "detour."

Part 17

The destination was a row of broken down warehouses. They were arranged from left to right. Each warehouse door was marked with a number. The leftmost one was labeled warehouse 1, the next one warehouse 2, and so on so forth. The rightmost one was labeled warehouse 12.

"In other words, Mike is being held in one of the warehouses."

We hid in the shadows behind one of the buildings and peered out onto the street.

"If my information is correct, then..."

Thanks to Himuro's partners, we'd managed to figure out those chest-haired bastards' identities. As expected, they didn't care about basketball at all. They only focused on gambling and extortion, so it was easy to get their information. Apparently they had only recently made their base here.

In other words, they were small-timers.

No wonder they went to such lengths after such a slight blow to their pride. Since it's always at the beginning of a gang's establishment when it is most dangerous to appear weak.

When we were looking for an opportunity, Himuro suddenly let out a quiet "Ah."

From the third warehouse, there were two shadows.

Two strangers.

They looked younger than the guy with the chest hair, and were wearing fancy t-shirts and camouflage pants. They were sitting on the third step of the stoop, carelessly smoking cigarettes.

“So that’s the one. If it’s only 2 people, I can just knock them out.”

Himuro wanted to bravely rush in, but I quickly grabbed the back of his shirt. “Don’t act so impulsively. I know you want to break their momentum, but at this point in time, there’s no need for a direct attack.”

“But I don’t want to keep Mike waiting for long.”

Himuro looked over at the third warehouse. There was a black curtain covering the window, blocking anyone from looking inside.

“That’s it! Give me some time to prepare,” I said. “I got this.” Himuro, although a bit surprised, nodded in agreement.

Part 18

Since there was someone watching the front of the warehouse, we chose to go around back. Entering the alleyway, we hid in the warehouses’ shadows to avoid getting seen.

First, we passed by the first warehouse. We were almost seen by the people wearing fancy jackets, but thankfully the weeds were tall enough to hide us. My ears told me that there was no one in there, so we went in. It wasn’t as much of a warehouse as a garage. The concrete floor was dotted with chairs and tables. The window we had come in through was reflecting the sunlight, making the room a little brighter.

Himuro looked around and whispered, “Was this some kind of business before or something?”

“Who knows? But it’s as I expected, which is good.”

Quickly scanning around the room, I found what I was looking for. Himuro followed behind me.

“What do you mean by ‘expected’?”

“I was looking for this thing.”

I knocked on the door. There was a sound that echoed.

“What kind of door is this?”

“It’s the fuse box.”

The door to the fuse box opened easily. In Japan, usually one warehouse contains the entire fuse box. It was the same here, so that’s good.

All the switches were lined up in a row with English instructions on top of each of the switches. Fortunately, there was also numbers that indicated which switch operated which warehouse’s power.

Most of them were off. Only the switches for warehouse 3 and 12 were flipped on.

“Warehouse 3 is the one that those guys were in front of, right? That must mean that Mike is being held in warehouse 12.”

“Mike’s in warehouse 12?”

“That’s what it seems like. They wanted to call us out and bring us to warehouse 3 so that they could beat us up.”

“Nasty. Real brutal,” I muttered to myself, laughing quietly. Suddenly, I noticed Himuro staring at me.

“What?”

“Shuu, you seem like you’re familiar with these sorts of things,” Himuro said, looking suspicious.

I immediately denied it. Quickly insisting that I didn’t have a history of theft or anything.

“Where did you learn that?”

“...”

I realized that was making myself look more and more suspicious. Himuro’s doubts seemed to deepen.

(Ah, what do I do?)

Did he want me to tell him the real reason? That wasn’t going to happen, it’s too embarrassing.

No...I need to give the right answer.

“Well, how do you say it...I regularly take ‘detours.’”

Part 19

I left the first warehouse to Himuro. Hiding to make sure that I wasn’t seen, I rushed toward warehouse 12. Glancing down at my watch, I could see that there was only twenty minutes left in the time limit. They’re probably getting impatient by now, and hopefully all of them are gathering in front of warehouse 3, but it’s not guaranteed.

I listened in at warehouse 12’s window. I could hear voices, and while I couldn’t determine the number of people, it didn’t seem like there was an overwhelming amount.

I checked my watch again. There were five seconds left until the time me & Himuro had agreed upon.

Four.

Three.

Two.

One.

Zu——n !

I suddenly felt a pressure disappear. Of course, it was just my imagination. However, the guys inside the warehouse weren’t expecting it, so combined with the lights suddenly shutting off moments later, the whole gang erupted in chaos.

Although it was far away, I could vaguely hear the commotion indicating that warehouse 3’s lights had also gone out.

The coast was clear. I had to make good use of this opportunity. I grabbed one of the fallen tiles that I had picked up from warehouse 1 and broke the window.

“What?!”

A man inside looked over in my direction. It seemed that he couldn’t stand the change in the light, and his eyes

narrowed. It wasn't surprising. Since Himuro had turned off the switch, the room had fallen completely dark. Once, I had broken the window, light from the outside had suddenly streamed in. It would have been weird if his eyes didn't sting.

This moment was crucial. I ran over to the man before he could say anything, but incredibly, someone beat me to it.

"Isn't this going overboard?"

It was Himuro, who was still supposed to be in warehouse 1.

(Even though you're confident in your own speed, isn't that a little too fast?! And he's powerful, too.)

Since the door was open, someone must have gotten away. And then there was the guy that Himuro just knocked out. Was someone else behind him (But, before we get to that, just how used to fighting are you?!)

The man fell unconscious to the ground. I tilted my head as I examined him. He looked familiar, but he wasn't the chest hair guy, the cap guy, or the mohawk guy.

Then, it suddenly hit me. It was the guy who had stolen my backpack!

I looked around. My passport was actually on the table! Even though I also wanted to search for my backpack, now was hardly the time for that.

Part 20

"Mike?"

"I'm here!" A voice shouted back.

Mike had been tied to a pillar. After we freed him, he flew at Himuro, burying his face in the taller boy's waist. The pair of small hands gripping Himuro's t-shirt were trembling. Himuro held him tenderly as he cried.

All of a sudden, I felt a heat rush through my head. My hand felt sore, too. At first, I thought it was because of the window that I had broken. Then I realized that it was because I had unconsciously clenched my fist so tightly that I was digging my fingernails into my skin.

"Shuu!"

"Huh?"

Because of Himuro's warning, I was able to react quickly, stepping back before the iron bar hit my head.

I backed away while Himuro stood up and shielded Mike. I don't know when it happened, but suddenly people were streaming in from the entrance. Then, I realized that the one holding the iron bar was the chest hair guy from before.

"Boy, you've come to the wrong place..."

I quickly tried to translate it in my head. I guess he was saying something like 'You guys have real nerve, coming here.'

"We're taking Mike back," I said, even though I knew that there was a language barrier.

"What?" The mocking tone in his voice made my blood boil. More people entered the warehouse. Eleven...twelve...sixteen...

Among them was the cap guy and the mohawk guy. The sixteen of them formed a circle around us, hemming us in.

Some of them were empty-handed, but most of them had weapons.

(Editor's note: how has no one pulled a gun yet? Is this really L.A.?)

"Shuu, I'll leave Mike to you."

"What?"

Himuro gently entangled himself from Mike and pushed him towards me. I quickly grabbed Mike's shoulders to keep him steady.

Then, Himuro sprang into action.

He quickly rushed past me, planted his left foot, and then sent a high-speed back kick into the chest hair guys with his right foot.

Thwack!

Himuro's roundhouse kick landed on the man's head, who didn't even have time to react before he fell to the ground, mouth foaming.

"What?!"

It all happened in a flash. No one had a chance to react. Himuro was the only one moving, calmly urging, "Shuu, hurry and get outside."

"Okay!"

I took Mike, stepped over the fallen man, and prepared to run for the door. However, before we could take a step, Mike—who couldn't go any further—fell to the ground.

Part 21

"Whoa!"

Since I was holding Mike's hand, I also lost my balance. Luckily, I didn't fall, but quickly squatted down to pick up Mike.

"Can you stand, Mi—"

I didn't have a chance to finish my sentence before our pursuers caught up and aimed a flying kick at me. I instinctively blocked it with my hands. While my body and face weren't damaged, the impact stung my wrists and knocked me backwards.

"Shuu!" I could hear Himuro shout.

Landing on my back, I felt a searing pain almost made me close my eyes. I suddenly saw the man who had kicked me looming above me, grinning.

"Not good...!"

I tried to get up, but the man was faster, not hesitating to stomp a foot into my face.

"?!"

The man let out a stunned noise when he realized there was suddenly nothing underfoot. Capitalizing on his

moment of hesitation, I, who had rolled out just before his foot had come down, sent him flying. It had been a while since I had last been in a fight, so my control wasn't very good. I might have broken some of his bones, but now definitely was not the time to be feeling guilty.

I elbowed the person coming up from behind me, adding in a few boxing tricks. As another person ran at me, I swept out my leg, knocking him to the ground.

"Shuu, you know karate?" Himuro asked, running beside me.

"Yeah, it seems like I can still do it."

"You're so reliable."

"Why don't you tell me that after we get out of here?"

I tried to protect Himuro, who was shielding Mike. Although, I'm a good fighter, there were still too many of them, and soon, we were surrounded once again.

In order to protect Mike, Himuro and I would have to fight back to back.

"Tatsuya...Shuu..." Mike wailed, uneasily.

The men drew closer.

"You don't have to worry, Mike," I heard Himuro say from behind me. "We are not alone."

I didn't understand what he meant, but it seemed to provoke the men, as they all came charging all at once.

BEEEEEEEEEP...!

Part 22

BEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEP...!

The sudden loud noise made everyone stop in their tracks. A sudden flash of light flooded the room, and I had to cover my eyes with my hand.

The noise had been the sound of car horns from right outside the warehouse. A sudden feeling of anxiety came over me. Had the enemies' numbers increased?

Sensing my uneasiness, Himuro said, "It's okay. They're on our side."

The door opened and a crowd of muscular men entered the warehouse.

"Those people are on our side?"

"Yeah, they're my street basketball buddies. They're here to help."

To help? How many of them are there? More cars continued to pull up, the numbers continuing to increase.

Mike gasped with surprise, "You men...all these guys are street basketball players?!"

"Yeah, they are all here to save you." Himuro's calm statement made the men around him start chattering. "After all, we're just ordinary citizens, so it's safer to have more people helping."

I really wanted to question his definition of 'ordinary citizens.' But, as I listened to the kidnappers struggling as a

crowd of huge basketball players chased them down, I chose to keep my mouth shut.

Part 23

After hopping into the car of one of Himuro's street basketball buddies, we finally left the warehouse.

"You could've told me that you had called for backup," I whined after we got in the car, wiping the dust from my backpack.

"I didn't tell you?" Himuro asked, smiling wryly.

"You definitely didn't mention it. I was pretty much scared to death."

"Sorry about that."

Himuro's plan was originally for the two of us to ensure Mike's safety, and then everyone else would finish the business.

"Still, I have a hard time believing that you would be scared to death over such a small thing, Shuu. Aren't you used to fighting as well?"

"..."

I felt a bit of tightness in my chest. "Planning for all of this, as well as the actual rescue mission...you're used to these kinds of things, aren't you?"

"Well, yeah..." Unable to continue, I simply turned and stared out the window.

"Good work, though."

"Eh?" I quickly turned back to look at him.

"It was thanks to you that we could get Mike out. So, thank you."

I didn't know what to say when faced with such gratitude. However, the pain in my chest had faded away.

"...Ha. I guess taking 'the scene route' isn't all bad."

"Hmm? Oh, sorry for keeping you this long. Club activities should be over soon," Himuro said, checking his watch.

"That's not what I meant."

"Eh?"

Himuro looked at me strangely. I took a deep breath. This would be my first time telling anyone.

Part 24

"In the past, I was a bit of a delinquent."

"A bit...?"

"I used to go around fighting everyone and anyone. If I took a hit, I had to pay it back tenfold. I suppose I had experienced everything that happened in the warehouse already."

"I wouldn't have been able to tell," Himuro said, choosing his words carefully.

I licked my lips, looked down, and continued. "My father saved me. At first he decided to wait it out, but eventually, he decided that he needed to do something to stop it. It escalated into a war between us, but that was what woke me up.

Shortly after, my father was hospitalized. At first, we thought that it was just a cold. We didn't imagine that it would be incurable. My father joked that maybe it was a concussion caused by my fist.

He was hospitalized during my second year of junior high.

I really blamed myself for that. Even though my dad had tried to cover it up as a joke, I couldn't help but think that my delinquent past had contributed to his unnecessary stress.

I decided to take responsibility. I told my family that if we couldn't pay for the medical expenses, I would quit basketball and find work.

At that time, my dad told me, 'A father is allowed to give things to his son, but he is not allowed to take anything away...'

Dad refused to let me sacrifice myself for him. He made sure I continued basketball so that I could graduate with the teammates I had played with all these years."

Part 25

"Even so, my father knows that I have not entirely forgiven myself for the past. That's why he told me to 'take the scenic route.'

On the day my father told me not to come to American until I had graduated, he also told me to take detours. He said that it could be fun, and that I could observe things from different points of views. He said that it might be useful to me.

It's not only my agreement with my father, but an obligation I've taken upon myself.

Today, I guess I finally understand what he meant. If I hadn't had my troubled past, I would have been useless today.

I feel like I can finally understand my past self a little better." Suddenly feeling embarrassed, I turned to look out the window again, watching as the scenery zipped past.

"Shuu."

"Yeah?"

I turned around. Himuro extended his hand toward me.

"A wish that your father will recover from his illness."

"Oh." I quietly grasped his hand.

Feeling a little awkward, I joked, "I can't see these hands as being able to punch people."

"Don't pay it any mind . These hands were made for basketball."

"Though, we still haven't had our one-on-one match, yet."

"When you've managed to settle down, feel free to contact me. I'll always be on that court."

"Got it. It's a promise."

As we let go of each other's hand, the phone rang. It was Himuro's teacher, Alex.

At the time, we didn't know, but we still had another little detour to take; to Himuro's teacher, Alex.